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ISLAMIC SECTS OF THE NEAR EAST

The Muhammadan community accepted the first three caliphs, or followers of the Prophet Muhammad. But when it came to the choosing of the fourth caliph in 657 A.D., there was a serious difference of opinion. The following two parties were formed:-

(a) A party composed of the majority of the Muslims of Syria and Palestine, who wished to have Mu'awiyah as their ruler. He was the governor of Syria and the son of the powerful chief of the family of Umayya. This noble family of Makkah, (Mecca), was more conspicuous for its financial influence than it was for its loyalty to the Prophet.

(b) A second party composed of the majority of the people of 'Iraq and Persia, who wished to have as their ruler 'Ali, who was famous for his piety, one of the first followers of the Prophet and the husband of the Prophet's daughter, Fatimah. His sons, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, were the surviving male descendants of Muhammad and the natural heirs to rule his theocratic state.

The settlement of this dispute was left to arbitration and decided in favor of Mu'awiyah and his Syrian party which became the legal Sunni Sect of Islam. The followers of 'Ali, who refused to accept the settlement were called Shi'ah. In English the names are usually written "Sunnites" and "Shiites."

1. Sunnites

This group represents the great majority of people in Egypt, the Northern Sudan, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Cyprus, Central Arabia and French Africa. Most of the Muslims in the Balkans are Sunnites and about one-third of those in 'Iraq.

They recognized the Umayyad, 'Abbasid and Ottoman caliphs as their leaders except for certain periods when the 'Abbasid caliphs had strong Shiite sympathies. When the Turkish Republic discontinued the Caliphate they were left without any head.

They regard the following acts as the five pillars of their faith:- (a) reciting the creed, "I testify that there is no deity but Allah and that Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah; (b) prayer; (c) fasting; (d) alms; (e) pilgrimage to Makkah.

Their doctrinal belief is based upon the Quran and the Hadith. The Quran was the pre-existent word given by God to mankind by the

mouth of the Prophet. The Hadith was the collection of well authenticated sayings of the Prophet.

Communities, pious foundations, rulers and wealthy citizens have erected schools, mosques, hospitals, orphanages and other forms of philanthropy. These buildings bring the Sunnites together for worship and social activity, but they regard true religion as a personal and spiritual matter.

Although Turkey has exchanged the canon law of Islam for European systems, the old canon law is still in force in most of the other parts of the Near East. The British and French did not attempt to discard it. Thus questions of marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc., are referred to the ecclesiastical courts. The best trained judges are usually graduates of the thousand year old al-Azhar University of Cairo. Graduates of this and other schools are also employed to conduct mosque services, to teach the Quran, and to conduct the simple ceremonies for marriage, death and circumcision.

There are four official schools of law:- the schools of Malik, Abu Hanifah, al-Shafi'i, and Ibn Hanbal. The Ottoman Empire followed the School of Abu Hanifah.

The scholar officially appointed to interpret the Quranic law in any district is called the Mufti. The Grand Mufti is the head legal authority of his state and he is often the leading social and political representative of his community. The Grand Mufti of Palestine was also President of the Supreme Muslim Council and President of the Arab Higher Committee. These two positions gave him great financial and political influence and his power was much greater than is normal for a mufti.

The Qadi is the judge of the canon law court who puts into practical use the Quranic interpretations which he obtains from precedent and from the fatwas of the Mufti.

The recognized graduate of a school of theology and law, who has the right to conduct mosque services and to work in canon law courts, wraps a white cloth around his fez and is known as a "Shaykh" by the Arabs and a "Hodja" by the Turks. The person who conducts the mosque service is often referred to as an "Imam" who need not be a well trained legal authority. The use of "Shaykh" and "Imam" in this sense should not be confused with the use of the word "Shaykh" to mean "Chief", and "Imam" to mean one of the recognized successors of 'Ali. Following the example of the Prophet, who had his blind slave call men to prayer, blind men usually stand on the minarets and sound the beautiful call to prayer. The man who chants the call to prayer is known as a "Muazzin", ("Muadhhdhin.")

The ecclesiastical organization of Islam is not centralized but is conducted by communities. On the other hand, the religious and legal institutions have become so clearly fixed that there is a remarkable unity of doctrine and method. Small training schools for

the Sunnite ecclesiastics are being conducted in many cities though most of the teachers are graduates of the great al-Azhar University of Cairo which serves as the intellectual center of the Sunnites of the Near East.

The Sunnites and Shiites both have many Dervish Orders which grew up in Islam very much as the monastic and ecclesiastical orders developed in Christianity. The word "Islam" indicates "submission" and there has been a deep spirit of piety among many believers from the time of Muhammad. During the materialism of the Middle Ages, certain pious believers found refuge in ascetic practices and mysticism. They were called "Sufis," probably because they wore coarse woolen garments.

Today the orders are exceedingly popular throughout the Islamic world but they are supported by the ignorant rather than the educated classes. In most of the orders the dervishes marry, so that their children keep alive their traditions. There are official members of the fraternities who wear special clothes and give their time to living in monasteries and directing the worship. There are also lay members who attend meetings but have their regular business of life to care for at other times.

Just as the Christian monasteries inherited estates and endowments, so the dervish fraternities grew rich and gained political influence. It was for this reason that they were expelled from the Turkish Republic much as Henry VIII treated the monasteries in England. Some of the most popular orders are:-

Qadiriyyah, founded by 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (Qaylani) in 'Iraq in 1165. There grew from this fraternity two other branches:-

Rafa'iyyah, 1182, sometimes called the "Howling Dervishes."

Sa'adiyyah, 1335.

Ahmadiyyah, or Badawiyyah, founded in the XIII Century by the great Egyptian saint, Ahmad al-Badawi. Branches of this order are the Baiyuniyyah, Shinnawiyyah, Awlad Nuh and Shu'aybiyyah.

Maulawiyyah, or Whirling Dervishes, founded by the great pantheist poet Jelal al-Din al-Rumi in 1273. This order used Konia as its center and was very influential in Turkey until it was thrown out of the country. The Grand Chelabi, or holder of the inherited leadership of the order, now lives at Aleppo in Syria.

Shadhiliyya, 1258.

Senussiyyah, (Senussi) founded in 1835 with the center at Kafra. This is a Puritanical and very powerful group in North Africa.

Bektash, founded in the XVI Century. It grew very powerful among Janissaries of the old Ottoman regime and is still influential in Eastern Turkey. It has certain Christian characteristics and in some ways resembles the 'Ali Ilahi movement of Iran.

In most of the orders there are stages of initiation. The devotees learn how to overcome the limitations of the flesh and to reach a state of ecstasy by prescribed practices. The Maulawiyah whirl in a very graceful and dignified way until they experience ecstatic sensations. The popular Rafa'iyah Order uses loud singing to drums, constant repetition of the name of the deity, cutting with knives, handling red hot objects and eating coals, glass and serpents, in order to produce spirituality.

Women often form their own groups to carry out the rites of the various orders.

2. Shiites

When Mu'awiyah was made ruler of the Islamic state instead of 'Ali, most of the Muslims of 'Iraq and Persia did not accept the new ruler with any sincerity. For generations their real attachment was to members of the "House of the Prophet", that is to the descendants of Muhammad through his daughter, Fatimah, who married 'Ali and was the mother of al-Hasan and al-Husayn.

When the members of the family of 'Abbas carried out their successful revolution against the caliphs of Damascus and founded the new 'Abbasid Dynasty in 750 A.D. they enlisted the aid of these discontented persons who hated the Damascus caliphs and desired to have a descendant of 'Ali as their leader.

The 'Abbasid caliphs developed the Islamic State as a Persian rather than an Arab community, so that their religious rites were different from those of the orthodox Arabs. The nonconformists of 'Iraq and Persia were the Shiites. Their name is more properly written "Shi'ah" and they are also called "Mitawalah."

Like the Sunnites they accept Muhammad as the Prophet of God and the Quran as the divine word of God given to mankind through the mouth of the Prophet. They accept the sayings of the Prophet, or Hadith, as well as the Quran, but their legal systems are somewhat different from those of the Sunnites. They accept the idea of "mut'ah" or temporary marriage, and "tahrim" or nominal marriage.

They believe in the Five Pillars but usually think of recitation of the creed as being a matter of belief rather than action. The Jihad or holy war is their fifth pillar.

Their mosques, schools, and pious foundations are not very different from those of the Sunnites. Their customs about washing before prayer are different only in matters of detail. They do not make as

much of public prayer and the Friday morning service as the Sunnites do.

The Shiites and the sects which have split off from their community believe in the idea of "taqi'yah", that is the right to falsify in order to escape persecution. They venerate 'Ali and honor his sayings along with those of the Prophet. They make pilgrimages to Najaf, where 'Ali was buried, to Kerbela, where his son al-Husayn was killed, to Qum, where the sister of one of the Imam's lies buried, as well as to Makkah. Not only do pilgrims visit Najaf and Kerbela but they also send their dead bodies to be buried in these cities of 'Iraq. Al-Najaf has also become an important center for theological study.

During the first ten days, or 'Ashura, of the month of Muharram the Shiites act passion plays and take part in processions. They work themselves into a state of fury and even beat themselves until blood flows. These rites are to commemorate the sad deaths of 'Ali and his two sons, al-Hasan and al-Husayn.

Instead of honoring the traditional caliphs of the Sunnites, the Shiites venerate twelve Imams, who were descendants of the Prophet's daughter Fatimah and her husband, 'Ali. The last of these Imams died near the end of the IX Century and will return as the Mahdi in due course of time. The tombs of these Imams are among the popular places of pilgrimage.

A majority of the people of 'Iraq, most of the fifteen million people of Iran, large numbers of the Muslims of India and small groups of people in Lebanon, Palestine and other countries are also Shiites.

Education and European ideas are causing the young Muslims to change their point of view, whether they are Sunnites or Shiites. They hesitate to go to the mosques to pray where they are expected to go through set motions and to touch their foreheads to the ground. They dislike the strain of fasting from sunrise to sunset during the lunar month of Ramadan. They no longer think of the Quran as the text book of action and learning. They question statements made by ecclesiastical authorities less educated than themselves.

They do not like the Quranic prohibitions against liquor, gambling and usury. They cannot afford polygamy and desire to have educated wives who can go with them freely as companions. They seldom go on the pilgrimage to Makkah or other places and shrink from taking part in feasts and processions. Turkey and Iran have already given up the veil and parts of the canon law. The Turkish Republic has abolished the Caliphate and written the Quran in letters different from those which the Prophet used.

On the other hand, young Muslims are proud of the glory of their past history, enthusiastic about Islam as a great social and political system, and justly fond of the truly beautiful passages which appear here and there in the Quran.

3. The Isma'iliyah

Numerous sects were formed during the Middle Ages, a few of them still in existence, which split off from the main Shiite community and have certain points in common.

Before the Sixth Shiite Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, died in 765 A.D. he denounced Isma'il, who was his natural heir to the Imamship, for intemperance and designated as the Seventh Imam another brother, Musa al-Kazim. But the friends of the repudiated heir refused to accept the change and formulated the doctrine that Isma'il was the last true Imam. They claimed that Isma'il, rather than the Twelfth Imam of the Shiites was the true Mahdi who would some day bring justice to the earth. These followers of Isma'il were called "Isma'iliyah." Sometimes they are called "Sevensers."

These Isma'iliyah developed a secret system of doctrine which became elaborated along metaphysical lines and which contained political aims of a revolutionary character. The doctrine was affected by ideas similar to those which influenced the Gnostic sects of Christianity. They held that there were seven steps of emanation:-(1) God; (2) Universal Mind; (3) Universal Soul; (4) Primeval Matter; (5) Space; (6) Time; (7) Earth and Man. The earth was given seven prophets:- Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and the son of Isma'il. They alternated with seven "Silent Prophets", of which Ali was one.

In order to assure secrecy there were at least seven stages of initiation. As the candidate became enlightened he learned to interpret the Quran in an allegorical way and to understand the metaphysical ideas. He also came to believe in transmigration of souls and the immanence of divinity in Isma'il.

'Abdullah, the son of a Persian oculist, hid in the little village of Salamyah on the edge of the desert East of Hama in Syria. It was he who most perfectly developed these secret doctrines and sent out missionaries in all directions to make men lose faith in their traditional religious and political institutions so that they would welcome initiation into the Isma'iliyah fraternity.

The immediate result of this propaganda was the formation of the Qarmatian movement which led to a revolt against the Caliphs of Baghdad. The Qarmatian rebels controlled the Persian Gulf regions of Arabia and 'Iraq from 899 A.D. to the XI Century.

No sooner had this movement lost its force than a famous rebel, al-Hasan ibn al-Sabbah, took over its Isma'iliyah doctrines and founded the order of Assassins, (Hashshashin), at Alamut in the western heights of the Alburz Mountains of Persia, 1090 A.D. Before the end of the XI Century the Assassins had gained outposts in Syria and during the time of the Crusades they held Masyaf, al-Kahf, al-'Ullayqah, and other Syrian castles.

The Tartars and the Mamluks of Egypt finally broke up the military power of the order but small groups of people found refuge in different parts of the world and kept alive the religious traditions of the Isma'iliyah. The Khojas or Mawlas of India and similar groups in Iran, Zanzibar and 'Uman still exist. There are a few thousand left in North Syria who are still called Isma'iliyan and probably about 300,000 in India and other places.

All of these groups believe that their common leader, the famous Agha Khan, inherits the incarnation of the deity from the Seventh Imam, Isma'il, so that they send him rich tributes and he is honored by a greater number of guns of salute than the other princes of India. As the religious rites of the sect are secret, little can be said about them.

In Syria their center is at Salmyah but they also occupy regions in the mountains west of Hama. It is stated on good authority that they use an unmarried girl as a symbol, called the "rawdah", for certain rites. The belief is that the girl who is born on the 27th day of the month of Rajab is to some extent an incarnation of the deity. Such a girl can be modestly clothed and set in the place of worship for veneration during the service. This idea probably originates from some ancient fertility rite but is now used in a symbolic way. When the girl marries another virgin born on the 27th of Rajab must take her place.

4. The Druzes

About the year 900 A.D. a political adventurer from Southern Arabia carried on such a successful Isma'iliyah propaganda in North Africa that he was able to overthrow the local Aghlabid Dynasty and to make one of the Isma'iliyah leaders the ruler. This leader who called himself al-Mahdi, founded the Fatimid Caliphate which ruled Egypt and large parts of North Africa from 909 to 1171 A.D.

The Sixth Fatimid Caliph was al-Hakim, who ruled from 996 to 1021 A.D., and was greatly affected by religion. This showed itself in one form through his unsympathetic treatment of the Christians and Jews and his destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It showed itself in another form when al-Hakim permitted al-Darazi, Hamzah, and other preachers to declare that the tenth and last incarnation of the deity had occurred in him.

Al-Darazi and his fellow missionaries formed a secret' fraternity along the lines of the earlier Isma'iliyah brotherhoods. It soon became known as the Druze Sect. Hamzah, rather than al-Darazi, was regarded as the true founder of the movement which probably owes its form and vitality to him.

The Druzes grew so strong in the fertile valley to the west of Mt. Hermon that a number of noble Arab families joined their ranks. They gradually fought their way into Lebanon and became the feudal landlords of many villages in the southern and central parts of the district.

As their numbers increased, a part of them moved over to Bashan south of Damascus, today known as Jabal al-Druze.

At the present time there are about 53,000 Druzes in Lebanon and a similar number in Jabal al-Druze in addition to small communities in Palestine and Trans-Jordan.

Their religious meetings are conducted in "khalwahs" where the services are secret. The 'Uqqal' is the person who keeps the strict moral code of the sect and understands the metaphysical ideas. Only the "Knowing one" is allowed to enter into the true secrets of the cult but every member of the sect, including a woman, can attend some of the meetings. In former times the Khalwah was placed on a hill and used as a center for political discussion as well as for religious worship. When danger approached a warning fire could be lit beside it.

The dogmatic teachings of the Druzes are contained in a number of secret books, copies of which have been found and translated during the wars of the past centuries. In brief the metaphysical ideas follow traditional beliefs of emanation and dualism.

The important thing from a practical point of view is the fact that the cult teaches almost Puritanical customs. The 'Uqqal does not smoke, drink, or marry more than one woman at a time. The services are simple and free from superstitious ostentation.

As modern European life is entering the country, few of the educated men are troubling to keep alive the 'Uqqal tradition so that there is danger that the sect will become more of a political party than a religious fraternity. Their flag is composed of seven stripes of different colors. It is not known what these colors represent.

5. The Nusayriyah

These people were called "Alaouites" by their French rulers. They are also called "Nusayriyah" after Muhammad ibn-Nusayr who lived at the end of the IX Century and was a well known partisan of the Eleventh Imam of the Shiites.

Most of the members of the sect inhabit the coastal range to the north of Lebanon, back of Latakiah. There are also a few in the Hatay Province and Cilician district of Southern Turkey. They dislike contact with people of other sects and maintain secrecy with regards to their religious ideas. Most of them are peasant. There are 224,000 in the Latakiah district of Syria. Their flag has a small sun in the corner.

Evidently this group passed directly from paganism into the Isma'iliyah movement. In accepting the doctrine of the seven incarnations, they gave 'Ali' such precedence that he was regarded as divine. Each one of the seven incarnations of the deity or divine light was called the "Meaning." This was attended by simultaneous incarnations

of two other elements called the "Name" and the "Door", so as to form a triad. Thus 'Ali was the Meaning, Muhammad the Name, and Salman the Persian the Door. Jesus was the Name when Simon Peter was the Meaning.

The Nusayriyah venerate the tombs of saints which are usually dome shaped buildings set in groves of ancient trees. They have a liturgy and honor Christmas and Easter in a certain fashion. They are so exceedingly exclusive and non-communicative that it is impossible to know the truth about statements made in connection with their cult. As they become educated it is likely that their sect will become more and more a political party and that their young men and women will seek European ideas.

6. The 'Ali Ilahis

This is a group living among the Shiites of Iran and several other countries. The members tell their Muslim neighbors that they believe that 'Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, was an incarnation of God.

Unlike the other Muslims they do not go to the mosques. They do not approve of polygamy but they do allow the drinking of wine and eating of pork.

They believe in five emanations of the deity and have a sacrificial feast; both ideas are more pagan than Muslim. Their leaders or "Pirs" and the assistants or "delils" conduct their ceremonies. They sometimes practice magic and ascetic rites. They have a number of holy books written in a Kurdish dialect, the most revered of which is the "Sar Anjam."

The 'Ali Ilahis have at least eight groups in Iran, India and other places known by local names. Their headquarters are at Kirman-shah in Iran, or Persia. They themselves claim that they number a million and it is true that there are probably more than 300,000 in Iran alone.

They have many things in common with the Bektashi Order of Dervishes. Some Christians believe that they are also related to Christianity. What is probably the truth is that their strange cult has drawn upon Shiite Islam, ancient pagan ideas, Christian doctrines and mystic practices to create a somewhat confused religion.

7. The Kizil-Bash

There are nearly a million members of the Kizil-Bash group in Turkey and Kurdistan. Their practices are similar to those of the 'Ali Ilahi but they have additional Christian and pagan elements mixed with their Islamic ideas.

They believe in a trinity, honor the Virgin Mary, and admit that God was incarnate in Jesus and the other prophets, as well as in 'Ali. They observe Easter and the feast of St. Sergius, as well as Muharram.

Their principal patriarch has lived near Sivas in Turkey and they have a number of important shrines in Eastern Asia Minor.

8. The Zaydis

Zayd was the son of 'Ali Zayn al-Abidin, who was the son of al-Husayn, who in turn was the son of the Prophet's daughter Fatimah and her famous husband, 'Ali.

Zayd led a revolt against the Umayyad Caliphs and about 740 A.D. was killed. His head was exhibited in a number of cities. But his followers and descendants gained the support of certain tribes in Arabia and eventually obtained control over the government of the Yaman, or mountain region of South-West Arabia.

The King of al-Yaman, and the principal families of his district are Zaydis. The sect is an off-shoot of Shiite Islam but the Zaydis do not believe in a hidden Imam, they prohibit temporary marriage and do not favor the idea of dissimulation at times of persecution.

Except perhaps for Tibet, al-Yaman has been the most isolated and reactionary country in Asia. Since the war the Imam has permitted a number of foreign visitors to enter the country and recently a Christian missionary has been given permission to reside there. Roads have been built, motor cars admitted, pumps installed and other improvements made. It is probable that during the next fifty years the Zaydis will become modernized and their sect will share with orthodox Islam the problems of modern western life.